

# Stop Decorating Dead Pigs

By Stephen Ruback, Professional Inspector [TREC License 6030]

Getting that house ready to sell requires more than a coat of paint, especially if it is a fixer-upper. Since most houses have seen little maintenance by the owners, any house older than 5 years old is potentially a fixer-upper. When was the last time you did your monthly maintenance walk-around to see what kinds of repairs are needed on your major lifetime investment? Older houses offer an even greater list of challenges.

Many people have fallen for the old seminar sales pitch about finding those bargain houses, slapping a bit of lipstick on them and making huge profits with little to no work. Don't fall into the trap. Uncle Remus had a more accurate story about a tar-baby. If you don't remember it, look it up. It is well worth reading, even today – maybe especially today.

The list of *don'ts* is legion for the would-be seller, but several top the hit parade.

- If you insist on putting a central HVAC system in the attic, be sure it has adequate access. These systems need annual maintenance and not all repair technicians are under 4 feet tall with magic levitation powers. The International Residential Code [IRC], the Texas law of the land for minimum building standards, is very specific in the minimum access requirements. Real people need to be able to get to the equipment – without sticking a foot or two through the ceiling.
- Those cute little flexible gas lines are NEVER to go through a wall or the sheet metal of a furnace housing. The shutoff valve needs to be accessible for emergency use, and blowers have a tendency to vibrate. Outmoded gas valves, no longer considered safe, should be replaced too. An impromptu, indoor weenie roast is way down on most people's fun list.
- Open holes in the attic floor promote significant energy costs. They also provide a handy chimney for the rapid spread of fire. A little bit of gypsum wallboard and some extra insulation can solve the problem for very little cost.
- Rock counter tops are all the rage. Calling them "stone" does not make them more sophisticated. Pieces of in the shape of tile are not the same. They have grout lines. Grout is like a sponge which soaks up every kind of stain and makes a perfect breeding ground for most microscopic "nasties" known to man. Keeping it clean is virtually impossible.  
Grout lines come with any other kind of tile on counter tops, too. Even one-piece stone tops are porous and accept stains, so they are supposed to be sealed. Sealants wear and go away with time – more maintenance. They are also heavy and brittle. Drop a piece of fine china or crystal on one and you will see another reason why they are not such a good idea after all.
- Painted brick on the outside of a house is a big warning sign. It converts a minimum maintenance wall covering to maximum maintenance one. Paint is usually put on brick to hide previous repairs. Did they fix the poor drainage that caused those cracks and probable foundation damage in the first place? Probably not.
- Horizontal trim boards along the bottom of most siding were not part of the original design. They were added to cover the rotted bottom of the siding. The new buyer will get to replace the siding in a few short years. The gap at the top of the trim will trap even more moisture and speed the rotting process.
- A water heater, the bomb in your house, needs access too. They tend to die from corrosion and leaks, which calls for a drip pan with a drain line. With a life expectancy of 8-10 years, replacement will happen. Can you do it without ripping out walls or roof areas?  
To keep them from blowing up, water heaters are equipped with a safety valve. Test it at least once a year. If it doesn't reseal completely, it failed the test and needs immediate replacement. When was the last time you tested yours? When activated, that little valve is designed to open full blast, dumping as much boiling water out of the tank as it can. Where would you like that flow to go?  
The relief valve manufacturer's instructions say very clearly, "do not restrict the size of the valve opening", yet over 80% are plumbed with 3/4 inch CPVC pipe which has an opening size 25% less than that of the valve. Exploding water heaters have been known to level a house. Some have risen as high as 500 feet in the air.
- All gas fired appliances need a good source of combustion air. When you hide one in a closet, they cannot get it, and become a very efficient carbon monoxide generator. Hiding them behind wall board enclosures eliminates access and can convert the whole house into a reasonably efficient gas chamber. Any resulting death or injury could keep the lawyers busy for years and probably voids your house insurance to boot.

A house is about a lot more than just cosmetics. Every house needs an inspection – even a new one.

*Stephen Ruback is a licensed Professional Inspector; member of TAREI, and HAR; approved by TREC as a Professional Home Inspection Instructor. and certified home energy inspector with Home Energy Tune-UP. Website: [www.sruback.com](http://www.sruback.com)*

*In addition, he has earned a BS in engineering from Trinity University, is an author of several books and teaches a variety of self empowerment courses. For more information, he can be reached at 832-489-1071.*